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XIV. *Account of a Cavern discovered on the North-west Side of the Mendip Hills, in Somersetshire.*

*By George Smith Gibbes, M. B. F. L. S.*

*Read April 2, 1799.*

PERHAPS the following account of a cavern which I visited some time since may be acceptable, as we there see the process going on, which Nature employs to enclose foreign substances in the hardest rocks.

At the bottom of a deep ravine on the north-west side of the Mendip Hills, in Somersetshire, near the little village of Berrington, there has been discovered a cavern of considerable extent, in which was found a great collection of human bones.

As I have observed in this cavern many circumstances which appear curious to me, I beg leave to mention them, as I do not believe there is another place in the kingdom where the different stages (if I may be allowed the expression) of bones incorporating with limestone rocks can be so well seen. From the top and sides there is a continual dripping of water, which being loaded with a large quantity of calcareous earth, deposits a white kind of paste on most parts of the cavern. Many of the bones are incrustated with this cement, and a large proportion of them are actually fixed in the solid rock. I suppose therefore that this substance, which at first is in a state resembling mortar, by losing its water hardens into a firm and solid stone.

stone. I had an opportunity of examining the process in every part. Had the cavern not been discovered, and these deposited substances not been removed, I do not doubt that the whole excavation would, in no great length of time, have been completely filled up. The water was still bringing fresh quantities of calcareous earth, and the bones were in some places completely incorporated with the solid rock. Every degree of intermediate solidity was plainly discernible. There were several nodules of stone, each of which contained a perfect human skull. The substance which is deposited from the water effervesces with acids, and has, in short, every character of limestone. At the farther end of this very curious cavern, where the height is about fifteen feet, there depends a most beautiful stalactite, perfectly conical, which, when the cavern was first discovered, reached within an inch of a cone of the same kind which rises from the floor. By some accident a small part of the stalactite was broken off; but Nature is now busy in repairing an injury which had been done to one of the prettiest productions of her mineral kingdom. Had these two cones met, a most beautiful column would have been formed, of nearly fifteen feet in height. On striking this stalactite, a sound is produced similar to that of a bell, which may be heard at a considerable distance beyond the mouth of the cavern.

I examined the bones with considerable attention, and I found that there was adhering to the surface of many of them, a substance which resembled the spermaceti I have before described, in the Philosophical Transactions for the years 1794 and 1795.

I have to add, that this cavern was discovered about two years ago by accident, and that no satisfactory reason has been given for this singular accumulation of human bones.